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The Relationship Between

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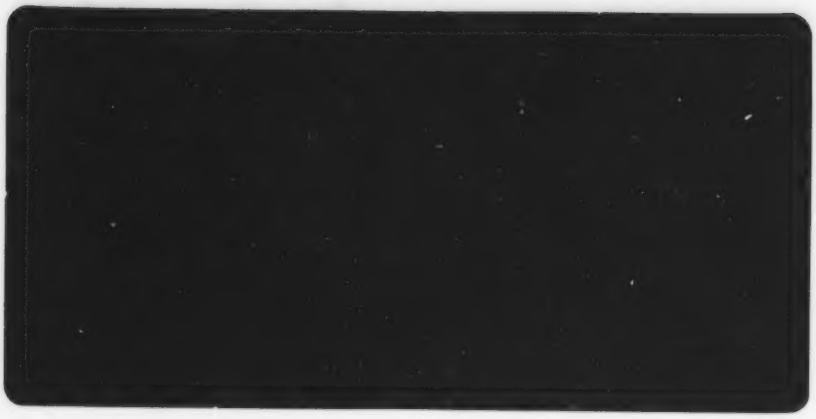

Woman Abuse:
The Relationship Between
Wife Assault and Elder Abuse

by
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Introduction

Included amongst the literature on family violence is research on both wife assault/abuse and elder abuse, yet within this literature virtually no attempt has been made to link the two. The purpose of this review of the literature is to demonstrate the relationship between wife assault and elder abuse and to show that many of the victims of the latter are women who have suffered years of abuse at the hands of their partners.

Wife Assault and Older Women

One theoretical framework often used to explain wife assault/abuse is that of power/control. Power/control based theories purport that it is men's socially ascribed status over women and the imbalanced power structure of a sexist social order that leads to the victimization of women, of which wife assault/abuse is only one aspect. Research shows the less power a woman has economically, educationally and in decision making in the family, the more likely she is to be abused, "...the use of violence by husbands was strongly associated with their dominance over their wives..." (Bowker, 1983, p.8).

There are few individuals in our society who have less power and influence than older women. "The elderly in our society are generally rejected, but we are particularly disdainful of older women. The discrimination begins in infancy and escalates as we become mature women. But it doubles as we grow older, for then we are not only women, but old women, perceived as unattractive, unneeded and parasitical." (Cohen, 1984, p.11).

Since most older women spent their lives in the traditional role of wife/mother, they are more likely to be economically dependent on a spouse or adult child. The prevailing societal support of the notion of biological determinism precluded these women from seeking paid employment. This not only left them disadvantaged in the early years of their marriages, but also prevented them from providing themselves with any financial support for their old age.

This ascribed role of wife/mother made education unnecessary for women since all they needed to know could be taught to them by their mothers and grandmothers. One of the most important lessons to learn was that the man was the head of the household and his home was his castle, he could rule it as he saw fit - be that benevolently or violently.

The fact that these women are being abused is difficult to dispute despite the meager amount of research being done in this area. While the age range of subjects in most studies on wife assault/abuse includes middle-aged and older women (45-65+), the mean age is much younger - approximately thirty. (Borkowski, Murch and Walker 1983; Donato and Bowker 1984; Finn 1985; Hilberman and Munson 1978; Hofeller 1983; Kincaid 1984; MacLeod 1987; Painter and Dutton 1985; Roy 1982). The literature on elder abuse shows that the typical victim is female and 75 years of age or older. (Chen, Bell, Dolinsky, Doyle and Dunn 1981; Gioglio and Blakemore 1983; O'Malley, Segars, Perez, Mitchell and Knuepfel 1979; Wolfe, Strugnell and Godkin 1982). When one looks at these bodies of research, it seems as if (with a few exceptions) women are victims of abuse until they are 40-45 years of age, then the abuse stops until they turn 75. This, of course, is not true.

Borkowski et al. (1983) provide a demographic description of various British samples which indicate that victims range in age from sixteen to over sixty. One sample shows that twenty per cent of the subjects had been in violent relationships for more than twenty years. Roy (1982) split another sample of 4000 abused women into five subclasses according to age, with the most victimized group being those between the ages of 26 and 35 (46%). However, a large percentage of the victims were over age 35 (30.5%), with a substantial number (8.8%) being over the age of 50. A survey by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration in the U.S., found that generally, while the risk of assault lessens with increased age, older married women are still at risk. Wife abuse as a percentage of all assaults for women aged 45-55 was 23.7%, for women aged 55+ it was 15.7% (Gaquin, 1978).

A Canadian study (Kincaid 1984) which included data from a questionnaire, Ontario courts and shelters, and a popular magazine, found that two of the greatest predictors of violence are traditional ideology and battering experience, both of which are more intensive in middle-aged and older women. These women are not only more vulnerable because of their increased time at risk, but also because the severity and frequency of violence tends to increase with time (Sinclair 1985).

The question of why a woman stays in an abusive and violent relationship for most or all of her adult life is an inevitable one. Gesino, Smith and Keckich (1982) found that these women stay for the same reasons younger women do, that is poor self-image, social isolation, the belief that the husband will change, shame, fear of retaliation from him, and stigmatization by friends and family*. The authors

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* *For a more complete explanation of why women stay, see Gelles 1983 or Painter and Dutton 1985.*

believe it is possible that because of their more traditional socialization, particularly with respect to loyalty to the marriage, the effects of these variables are stronger for older women.

Battered women, in addition to various physical ailments such as chronic headaches, asthma and chest pains (Hilberman and Munson, 1978), also suffer severe psychological effects.

"The women were a study in paralyzing terror ...the stress was unending and the threat of the next assault, ever present...Agitation and anxiety bordering on panic were almost always present... They talked about being tense and nervous... Events even remotely connected with violence, whether sirens, thunder, people arguing or a door slamming, elicited intense fear. A woman who had been shot by her husband panicked at any loud noise. There was chronic apprehension of imminent doom, of something terrible always about to happen. Any symbolic or actual sign of potential danger resulted in increased activity, agitation pacing, screaming and crying. They remained vigilant, unable to relax or to sleep. Sleep, when it came, brought no relief. Nightmares were universal, with undisguised themes of violence and danger... There was a pervasive sense of hopelessness and despair about themselves and their lives. They saw themselves as incompetent, unworthy, unlovable and were ridden with guilt and shame. They felt they deserved the abuse, had no vision that there was any other way to live, and were powerless to make changes." (Hilberman and Munson, 1978, pp.404-465).

The absence of a substantial body of research on the topic allows only speculation as to the impact upon, and treatment of, the older woman victim of life-long violence and abuse. Kincaid (1984) found that while women up to age 74, who had been married for more than 35 years, were victims of wife assault/abuse, no women over age 50 were found in the Interval House statistics. MacLeod (1987) found only six per cent of the residents in transition houses were over the age of 50. Why are older women not taking advantage of one of the few methods of escape available to assaulted wives? Are the supports and resources needed by these women available through transition houses? Does the older victim even know such places exist? These are questions that remain unanswered by the existing literature.

The difficulties facing these women are even greater than those of their younger counterparts. The older battered woman is at a greater disadvantage than the victim who is under 30 (Pagelow 1981); due to a lack of education and job experience, employment will be harder for her to find. She may hold the belief that it is "too late" for her to start a new life, or she may fear the unknown, thinking "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't". It is also likely that the woman is so traumatized by her life experience, and so deeply embedded into the "Battered Woman Syndrome" (Walter, 1983) that change cannot even be thought of, let alone a plan of action devised. The 'cycle of violence' espoused in social learning theory can be readily applied to the older abused woman who has been a perpetual victim of family violence since childhood. Often victims and perpetrators were raised in violent homes, were abused as children and/or saw their mothers being abused. "... an outstanding characteristic of violent families is the degree to which violent actions are legitimized... It is the first, not the last, resort." (Star 1980, p.344). Straus (1980) states that three factors account for the prevalence of family violence:

1) a high level of conflict within families;

2) the training in violence and the link between love and violence established by physical punishment;

3) the implicit cultural norm which gives family members the right to hit if someone is "doing wrong" and won't listen to reason.

MacLeod (1987) found that 61% of the husbands/partners of the residents of transition houses that were included in her study had been victims of child abuse. Forty-nine percent of the women had been physically abused, 24% were victims of sexual abuse and 48% suffered emotional abuse as children.

"The child who grows up in a family where there is not only a pattern of male dominance but where that male dominance is maintained by physical violence against the woman and/or children may learn that it is appropriate for men to use violence on family members for whom they believe they are responsible or for whom they need to feel responsible" (Kincaid 1984, p.88).

If many of the men who abuse their wives do so because they were socialized to this behaviour through watching their fathers' violent actions, it is also possible that they learn to be abusive towards their mothers in the same way. While evidence of this is scant, some research in the area does exist. Charles (1986), in a study of non-lethal violence by children against their parents, found that two thirds of the abuse is by males. Further, while abuse by females starts at a younger age than males, it does not continue at the same rate. No conclusions were made as to whether violence against mothers is more prevalent than against fathers. Cornell and Gelles (1982) found that the rates of severe violence against parents is almost as high as that of wife or child abuse, with the most typical form of violence being older sons hitting their mothers. The authors explain the prevalence of violence towards mothers rather than fathers in four ways:

1) Mothers spend more time with their children, therefore the time at risk is greater.

2) Mothers lack the physical and social resources to retaliate against their violent children.

3) Children may learn that their mothers are appropriate targets for abuse because they are already victims of wife assault.

4) Sons and daughters are more likely to use severe violence against their mothers if she is a victim of wife abuse, but none of the children from such families ever used violence against their fathers.

Although little or no research exists to support this hypothesis, in light of the above-mentioned studies, it is highly probable that many women live their lives in a 'continuum of violence' stretching from childhood, through marriage, into middle and old age, when they become victims of elder abuse.

The prevalence of elder abuse is even more difficult to estimate than that of wife assault. One of the reasons for this was expressed by Cohen 1984:

"These older women were ready and often eager to talk about housing, health, and income problems; they would discuss their sexual and emotional experiences; yet almost none would discuss violence. I sensed a deep-seated embarrassment about the fact that they found themselves victims or potential victims of such abuse and violence. As a result, I had great difficulty in finding case studies in this area more than any other" (Cohen 1984, p.112).

Estimates are that at the very least, 1 million American elderly people, or one in twenty-five, are abused each year (Langley 1981), and it is believed that the rate is the same in Canada (Vis-à-Vis, 1983).

Chen et al. (1982) state that most victims were women between the ages of 60 and 80, with most abusers being male between the ages of 40 and 60 who had a close relationship with the victim, either an adult child, spouse, grandchild, sibling or nephew. Wolf and Pillemer (1984) drew similar conclusions about victims and perpetrators with the additional factors of mental illness and alcoholism of the abuser.

There is no doubt that many women spend their whole lives as victims of violence at the hands of those who are supposed to love them the most. They are physically and sexually abused as children, get married and become victims of wife assault, grow old and find themselves being abused by their children. Further research is needed to discover the incidence and prevalence of lifetime abuse and the effects such experiences have upon the victims. Only then can effective forms of treatment, and the social supports necessary for implementation of such treatment, be developed in conjunction with above all, methods to stop the "cycle of violence" from claiming any more victims.

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